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The storm began as I reached the store, lightning carving across an angry sky, thunder rumbling in answer.

The woman at the door, her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot, freed a shopping cart for me.

Another flash, followed immediately by booming thunder, and the store lights died.

I returned my cart.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "You can't leave."

"What?"

A white-haired lady, her topcoat bulging strangely, tried to slip out past her. The woman stopped her, too.

"Security system's electric. 'Til the power's back, no one leaves. Store policy."

Before I could argue, I heard sobbing. A small girl approached, tears on her face.

"What's the matter, hon?"

"My mommy's gone."

"Don't worry about it," I reassured and extended my hand.

But she had stopped at the edge of the last shred of light, apparently as afraid of me as she was of the darkness itself.

"Where'd you see her last?" I asked and knelt down on one knee.

"I don't know," she whimpered, taking a step backward into the shadows.

Outside, the last trickle of light drained from the clouds as they draped across the front of the store like a thick woolen blanket.

"Don't be afraid, I'm going to help you find your mommy."

The child took another awkward step backward and seemed to blend into the dense blackness beyond.

“Wait a minute, I...”

And then she was gone, like a puff of smoke wisped from the air by a gentle breeze. I squinted and tried to get my eyes adjusted to the dim light, but was barely able to make out faint shapes in the distance. Strange outlines dancing and bobbing through the darkness. Probably just a trick played by a light deprived optic nerve.

As I turned to the woman at the door, there was another clap of thunder and a lightning strike that was so close, it seemed to explode from somewhere within the store. For an instant, the woman’s form was a pitch-black silhouette, outlined by an orange-ish glow.

“No one shall leave.”

My ears were still ringing from the intensity of the strike and the woman’s voice sounded thick and gravelly. I shook my head to clear my ears and from deep inside the store, I heard the faint whimper of the lost child. My head spun on my shoulders, trying to locate the sound. Still blinded from the flash, I could see nothing but the woman’s still visible silhouette, dancing in front of me like a paper cutout.

Then another lighting strike. This one knocked me forward onto my hands. I turned back, expecting to see the eerie silhouette behind me as the lightning continued to dance in the distance. But the woman wasn’t there anymore. She was gone.

“Help me...somebody.... please help...” the tiny voice pleaded, lost deep in a sea of reverberated echoes.

Somewhere inside the store was the child, still looking for its mother. My eyes searched the darkness in vain, but all I could see was the ominous shapes and imagined movement of black on black.

I glanced toward the front of the store and still no woman. My instinct was to run, to bolt for the door and just get out of this place.

“Help me...”

Again, thunder. A deep paralyzing sound that seemed to hold me down with the sheer force of its will. As if an invisible malevolent arm had been grasping me tightly and was trying to suffocate me right there on the floor. My lungs tightened and I couldn’t breathe.

Again and again the lightning hit and the thunder echoed through the store like rounds fired from an enormous cannon. I tried desperately to get up, but my hands seemed to be glued to the floor.

“Please...help...”

Her voice was so frail.

“I’m coming,” I yelled, “Hold on, I’m coming.”

I sucked in a deep breath that filled the corners of my lungs and forced myself to my feet. My heart was pounding so frantically it made my throat hurt. I looked around, desperately trying to see something, anything, but there was only blackness.

“Please...”

I knew I had to help her so I ran forward, stumbling through the darkness, knocking into abandoned shopping carts and shoving over racks of clothes.

“I’m coming. Where are you?” I screamed as loud as I could, spinning blindly and pushing over everything in my way.

Click-click. Click. Click.

The overhead metal-halide lights were coming back on in a rhythmic pattern from the back of the store to the front. I stood for a moment as my eyes adjusted to the bright light. I could see a dozen people standing around me, staring with petrified looks on their faces. On the floor around me were scattered clothes and overturned shopping carts.

Behind me I heard the child crying softly. As I turned, I saw the white-haired woman in the bulging topcoat standing behind the little girl, her hand planted firmly on the little one’s shoulder.

“You can never leave here,” she said.

And with that, the lights went out, leaving me lost in the blackness.